

Unearthing the Liturgy's true meaning to counter church secularisation: Father Alexander Schmemmann

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Secularism is a very popular topic in social sciences and in theology. Father Alexander Dmitrievich Schmemmann (1921–1983) addressed this topic and raised many questions, which are still very relevant in today's Eastern European context. He presented the distinctive vision of the Eastern Church, according to which all the solutions to overcome the actual crisis caused by secularism can be found by rediscovering the Liturgy of the Church as the primary source not only for theology but for all other aspects of church life.

Contribution: The present article aims to discuss the whole problematisation related to the impact of secularism on orthodoxy and to present the highly topical solutions that Father Alexander Schmemmann proposed for the survival of the Christian Orthodox ethos in the novel conditions of the postmodern world.

Keywords: secularism; secularisation; Liturgy; Alexander Schmemmann; Eastern Orthodox Christianity; Liturgical Theology; communism; liturgical crisis.

Introduction

Out of the mixed legacy bestowed on humanity by the postmodern world, the most pervasive one that Christianity has to face is secularisation. Modernity has always been defined as secular because it marked a separation and distinction between the church and the state, a detachment of public life from religion, a decline in religious beliefs and enabled the state to adopt a position of neutrality with regard to religious beliefs, especially with the church. Modernism is a new reality that man experiences today. Its content is transmitted through all the institutions brought to life by the evolution of technological production and the organisation of the bureaucratic state (Berger, Berger & Kellner 1974:102). Technology and bureaucracy, to which the educational system, media, urbanisation and social mobility are associated, are the factors that determine man's perception of reality and his consciousness. The impersonalism promoted by all these institutions contributes to a dichotomisation, a segmentation of public and private life (Berger et al. 1974:169), an anonymisation of social relations and a loss of people's trust in the primary institutions of the state:

Increasingly in advanced industrial societies (apparently regardless of their particular ideological or institutional character), people have come to feel 'alienated' from the polity and its symbols. Political life has become anonymous, incomprehensible and anomic to broad strata of the population ... All the major public institutions of modern society have become 'abstract'. That is, these institutions are experienced as formal and remote entities with little or no meaning that can be concretized in the living experience of the individual. (pp. 32, 183–184)

In such a secularised world, marked both by warring diversities that cannot find common ground and by imposed, rigid uniformities, a new type of polytheism has emerged. Spiritual quests did not disappear, but they came to be oriented exclusively towards the material world (Lathrop 1997:219). Despite all the touted benefits brought on by the modern era, that is the progress made by scientific research and its wide accessibility, the development of arts and communications and the globalisation process (Toroczka 2016:258), contemporary societies are experiencing an 'exit from religion', which does not indicate a departure from religious beliefs, but rather a religious disaffiliation, a departure from a world structured around faith and focused on hierarchies and interpersonal relationships. Unfortunately, this secular worldview started to gain more and more ground into and within historical orthodox countries after the fall of communism. As they became open to Western cultural influences, after decades of tightly restricted cultural transnational and

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trans-ethnic exchanges under the Communist regime, the Eastern European societies, the Romanian one in particular, have had to undergo their own secularisation – a widespread decline of religious beliefs and practices in their midst, as a natural consequence of modernisation.

This phenomenon occurred in Orthodox Christian communities founded, throughout America and Western Europe, by those who managed to escape from totalitarian communist regimes in the first decades of the last century (1910–1940). After the fall of the Iron Curtain and the enlargement of the European Union, the Orthodox Churches in the diaspora have developed substantially, and their contact with the modern secular world influenced their canonical, liturgical and spiritual life.

The person who undertook the task of studying and describing this phenomenon was Father Alexander Schmemmann in the 1970s. During his eventful life, which he spent in numerous cultural and theological contexts, he identified the issues that orthodoxy had to face in modern societies and sought to provide solutions to them. Inspired by the pre-conciliar theology of Jean Danielou and Louis Bouyer, as well as by the neo-patristic theology that postulated a return to the Church Fathers, Alexander Schmemmann instrumentalised his writings to tackle problems in the cultic life of the Church: the liturgy and the sacraments, the place and purpose of Liturgical Theology in modern scholarship and the impact of secularism on church life. His contribution in finding solutions to these many problems is extremely important, because all his analyses and conclusions are based both on scholarly research and on his remarkable pastoral experience and vision. He thought, lived and became aware of these problems and sought solutions to them both intellectually and spiritually. By living and experiencing *lex orandi as lex credendi* in his own life, by reading the Church Fathers and adopting their way of thinking, Alexander Schmemmann succeeded in putting forward a theology that developed out of the experience of faith, and that is what makes it so actual, so widespread and so well known.

Secularism

Secularism is a popular topic in social sciences and religious studies (Bronk 2012:578). Many attempts have been made to rethink the phenomenon of secularism itself in its many diverse manifestations in the contemporary globalised and pluralised world (Casanova 2011:55–53). The word '*saeculum*' originally meant 'age, long period of time'. The term '*saeculum*' in ecclesiastical Latin, as in Augustine's writings, seems to be synonymous with '*mundus*' (Smith 1966:37). As early as the 13th century, English recorded the use of the term 'secular' in the sense of 'belonging to the world', as opposed to being contained by church and religion, that is in the negative sense of non-ecclesiastical, non-religious or non-sacred (Casanova 2002:7–22). Soon, this word became one of the terms of the religious/secular dyad and was subsequently linked with other binaries such as: 'City of God'/'City of

Man', natural/supernatural, transcendent/immanent, sacred/profane, private/public, spiritual/temporal, which turned into a system of classification that separated two worlds, the religious-spiritual-sacred world of salvation and the secular-temporal-profane world (Casanova 2009:1051). Modern social sciences are now trying to define this term by a distinction between 'the secular' as a central modern epistemic category, 'secularisation' as an analytical conceptualisation of modern world-historical processes and 'secularism' as a worldview and ideology (Casanova 2011:54). Modernity and modernisation are responsible for this new world view, which is highly promoted by school curricula, media information and diverse advertising, on purpose to achieve the separation of church and state, the placing of religion in the private sphere, the secularisation of the law and public education and the loss of the church as a locus of community life (Berger et al. 1974:80).

'The secular' has become a central modern theological-philosophical, legal-political and cultural-anthropological category, whose design is to construct, codify, grasp and experience a realm or reality differentiated from 'the religious' (Casanova 2011:55). 'The secular' is often assumed to be simply whatever is outside of 'the religious', that which is non-religious. It only serves as a residual category in this regard. It is ironic, however, that the secular has grown to include and, in some ways, replace religion in today's world (Bronk 2012:580; Taylor 2007:268).

Modern sociology asserts that the phenomenon of secularisation should not be perceived as the disappearance of religion but rather 'the religion to exit from religion', which does not mean an exit from religious faith, but rather a turning away from a world based on hierarchies and interpersonal relations, in which faith is structured (Frey 2020). The departure from religion signifies the transition into a cosmos where faiths still exist. Still, they do so within a political forum and a collective order that no longer concerns them (Casanova 2010:29–44). The exit from religion is an exchange of the ancient forms of faith with something other than religion, the reassembling of the human world by the incorporation, integration and reorganisation of what it had long held as its religious otherness (Gauchet 1997:9).

Modern sociology speaks about a 'privatisation of religion' stating that religion has had to evacuate one area after another in the public sphere and to maintain itself as an expression of private meaning (Berger et al. 1974:80). Therefore, religion has lost its ancient and vital role in providing the overarching canopy of symbols for the meaningful integration of society and the cognitive and normative structure that makes it possible for man to feel 'at home' in the universe (Berger et al. 1974:79). The final consequence of this secularising effect of pluralisation and of the rationalisation of consciousness is the fact that modern man has suffered from a deepening condition of 'homelessness' from a metaphysical loss of 'home' (Berger et al. 1974:81). The pluralistic structures of modern society

have made the life of more and more individuals migratory, ever-changing and mobile. This generated a veritable crisis of identity. Man is no longer anchored in anything objective and real that places him in a system of perennial and constant values, but takes refuge in his own ego and 'because something that is constantly changing is supposed to be the *ens realissimum*, modern man is afflicted with a permanent identity crisis' (Berger et al. 1974:78). The 'homelessness' of modern social life is the direct consequence of the fact that religion has been banned in the private sphere, which has remained without any institutional support and prey to all the freedoms and discontents of the modern world. This private sphere has arisen as 'an interstitial area left over by the large institutions of modern society' and, as such, 'it has become underinstitutionalised and therefore become an area of unparalleled liberty and anxiety for the individual' (Berger et al. 1974:184).

The contemporary 'homelessness' drama stems from the misapprehension of the integrating and unifying role that religion has in the world and from the overlooked opportunity it affords to the modern man to anchor himself through faith in another reality, which can provide a perennial and unique 'home' (Lathrop 2014:10–25).

Through secularisation, modernity brought a new worldview, which is neither anti-religious nor atheistic. Still, it is a new way of living, wherein the foundational elements of human existence are not anchored in a religious belief, and the possibility of such a connection is denied. This new way of perceiving the world is gaining ground in the individual's consciousness, bringing with it a critical questioning of all traditional Christian values, as well as new tendencies of thought that are diametrically opposed to the Christian philosophy of life. The world of today, which is heavily industrialised and urbanised strongly defends its credo: believing without belonging, being free of any national bonds and rejecting any institutionalised religion in favour of a self-determined religion. All those who have been changed into nameless individuals by the bureaucracy of big business and the stress of a life based solely on material items are included among the adherents of this new 'non-denominational' denomination. Like many different aspects of post-industrial and post-modern civilization, religious life is in danger of being altered and replaced by a vicarious religion rather than vanish (Davie 2015:78–81).

Alexander Schmemmann was very concerned with this phenomenon, namely with this new kind of religiosity emerging in the modern societies of the last decades (Erikson 2002:307–314). His extremely pertinent remarks and observations on the impact of secularism on the Orthodox Church and on Christianity in general are still relevant today. The solutions he proposes for overcoming the spiritual crisis generated by this phenomenon could form an entire missionary programme for the Christian churches today. His work may give the impression that he was a reformer. However, he primarily asked questions and put his finger on

the wounds without questioning the structures. Schmemmann's methodology is concerned not only with securing objectivity as the basis of Liturgical Theology through historical sciences but also with going beyond them, so as to show the necessity and function of theological interpretation. He was a researcher, a theologian, a priest, a preacher and a visionary of the church. The primary purpose of his theological thought and way of writing is to lead the reader into another dimension – that of spirituality and inspiration.

Alexander Schmemmann's critique of secularism

Schmemmann lived in a variety of cultural settings during his lifetime (Louth 2015:194–209). Perhaps this rich cultural contrast enabled him to become a keen observer of his surrounding climate (Plekon 1994:275–288). Born in Estonia, trained and established in France and then in the United States of America, early in his life, he had direct encounters with both Western Christianity, which was going through a major identity crisis as a result of its split with the early church tradition and the modern secularised world typified by the development of positivism and the introduction of existentialism (Fisch 1990:1–10). In order to bring awareness to concerns of a theological, liturgical, doctrinal and spiritual nature that troubled the church at that time, Alexander Schmemmann produced a number of theological essays, also known as personal-subjective musings and reflections. His observations are incredibly relevant, true and actual. Most of his writings, beginning with *Introduction to Liturgical Theology, For the Life of the World, Of Water and the Spirit, The Eucharist* are concerned with an analysis of the history and theology of Christian worship but other collections of articles such as *Church, World, Mission: Reflections on Orthodoxy in the West*, as well as three volumes of sermons, translated into English as *Celebration of Faith*, are dealing with the missionary problems of the Orthodox Church in the secularised American society (Louth 2018:IX–XI).

Throughout his adult life, Schmemmann (1979) struggled with the meaning of orthodoxy in a North American culture that he perceived as becoming increasingly secular. What was the destiny of the Orthodox Church when it existed:

[I]n a world radically different from that which shaped our mentality, our thought-forms, our whole life as Orthodox, in a world moreover marked by a spiritual crisis which acquires with each passing year truly universal dimensions? (p. 8)

As a result of such secularism, Schmemmann (1965:174) believed that the Orthodox Church had lost, to a great extent, its own vision and identity by a tragic, unconscious and progressive surrender to secularism.

He defines this situation as 'crisis', stating that its root cause is secularism, the peculiar disease of the modern society, which he expounds on in all of his writings in many ways and great detail. Here are some of his most important definitions of this phenomenon:

1. Secularism is a novel worldview and way of life that emphasises freedom and independence from organised religion, but it is neither anti-religious nor atheistic. It is, in fact, a 'philosophy of religion' as much as 'a philosophy of life', because it accepts religion as essential to man and, at the same time, it denies it as an integrated world view, a total and all-embracing way of life with God permeating and shaping the entire existence. By relying upon the dichotomy sacred/secular, secularism relegates the sacred to one sphere. It thus denies the sacramental character of the whole world and of one's place in the world. Religion holds a relatively 'benign' place, 'because its impact on all of life is simply neutralized' (Schmemmann 1965:173).
2. Secularism is 'the progressive and rapid alienation of ... culture' which has enveloped humanity in modern times. It is an 'attempt to steal the world away from God' and its purpose as the means of communion with Him. Consequently, humanity, and not God, has become the measure of all things, a thought pattern that has eroded the foundations of Christian identity (Schmemmann 1973:7–16).
3. Secularism is acknowledged as a 'Christian' phenomenon because of the Christian revolution. It can be explained only within the context of the history whose starting point is the encounter between Athens and Jerusalem (Schmemmann 1973:111). As a 'stepchild' of Christianity, 'secularism is a heresy, a Western heresy, a distortion, an exaggeration, and therefore a mutilation of something true, an affirmation of one "choice," of one element at the expense of the others, a fragmentation of the catholicity of Truth' (Schmemmann 1973:127–129).
4. Secularism is above all a negation of worship but not of God's existence, or of transcendence and, therefore of some kind of religion. If secularism in theological terms is a heresy, it is primarily a heresy about man, as it negates man as a worshipping being, as *homo adorans* (Schmemmann 1973:118).
5. Secularism brings Christian faith to nominalism and formalism by providing some ethical standards and a sense of comfort, but denying its power to change man and ensure the formation of an integrated worldview. Christianity nevertheless holds a place of relative innocence because of the neutralisation of its impact on every facet of life. Christians' lives in the church are no longer centered on eschatological preparation, but rather on material and spiritual comfort (Schmemmann 1965:173).

All these definitions given by Alexander Schmemmann to secularism resonate with those of modern sociology, which places today's societies in the sphere of a new religion that postulates the autonomy of human existence and at the same time admits the existence of God. The qualification of secularism as heresy is fully justified, because the world is perceived finitely in itself, and the presence of God and the real and personal relationship with him does not make any sense. Thus, Christian faith inevitably occupies only a small 'place' in people's lives. It provides the help so much needed to succeed in the everyday earthly life, which is itself changed

in ways that promote secularistic values and it assists in attaining them.

For Alexander Schmemmann (1965), accepting secularism means a total transformation of Christianity itself. It may keep all of its traditional external forms, but on the inside, it will simply be a different religion:

In secularism, when it 'approves' of religion and even declares it necessary, it does so only since religion is ready to become a part of the secularistic world-view, a sanction of its values and a help in the process of attaining them. (p. 174)

Eastern Christianity facing secularism: The crisis

One of Alexander Schmemmann's favourite themes has been his description of how orthodoxy met secularism in Western Europe and 20th century America. His historically and theologically pertinent analysis is highly topical. Its results can be applied in the context of the development of the orthodox diaspora in Western Europe in the first decades of the 21st century. Almost all the problems Alexander Schmemmann raises can be found today not only in the Western European diaspora but also in the Eastern European countries of the former Communist Bloc, which have been integrated into the European Union in recent decades and have thus had to face the secularism of modern societies.

Schmemmann emphasises this challenging encounter between Eastern Christianity and the secularism of Western culture and civilization, which has given rise to a crisis in the Orthodox Christian world. He (Schmemmann 1979) identifies two developments in the modern history, which led to the deep crisis that permeated the whole life of the Orthodox Churches:

The first development is the tragically spectacular collapse, one after another, of the old and organic 'Orthodox worlds' which only a few decades ago appeared as the self-evident, natural and permanent 'home' and environment of the Orthodox Church – and not merely their collapse but also their transformation into the stage for a violent attack launched by an extreme and totalitarian secularism against religion, against the spiritual nature and vocation of man. The second is the rapid and massive growth in the West of the Orthodox diaspora which, however 'accidental' it may have been in its origins, signifies the end of the isolation of orthodoxy in, and its total identification with, the 'East', and thus the beginning of a new destiny in the West and within the context of Western culture. (p. 8)

After the exit from the totalitarian communism and after the collapse of the organic 'Orthodox worlds', the encounter with the Western secularism challenged orthodoxy (Schmemmann 1979) in:

[H]er very essence and being, trying to reduce her to values, philosophies of life and world-views profoundly differently from, if not totally opposed to, her vision and experience of God, man and life. (p. 9)

Faced with this new heresy of the modern world, Eastern Christianity proved to be weak and vulnerable, surrendering

progressively and unconsciously to secularism, losing its own vision and identity. As a result (Schmemmann 1979):

[A] tragic nominalism permeated the entire life of the Orthodox Church and prevented her from fulfilling her essential mission, her task of judging, evaluating, inspiring, changing, transforming the whole life of man, of generating that creative tension between herself and the world, which makes her into 'the salt of the earth'. (p. 14)

This situation is named 'crisis' by Schmemmann, who understood this term in its primary significance, 'meaning: judgment, a situation calling for choice and decision, for discerning the will of God and for the courage to obey it' (Schmemmann 1979:9).

The reduction of orthodoxy to the hedonistic world view of modern secularism and the multiple changes it has suffered in contact with Western societies brought it to a 'liturgical crisis' (Schmemmann 1963:20–23), characterised by a series of dysfunctions or anomalies in all the aspects of church life. For Alexander Schmemmann, the secular reductions of the person, of the parish and of the worship are the main changes that permeated Eastern Christianity in modern times. Father Schmemmann believed that understanding and becoming aware of these tragic changes, as well as taking appropriate action, constitute the first missionary duty.

What follows are the three fundamental aspects of church life which Schmemmann believes secularism has penetrated, thus altering the Christian ethos, his philosophy of life.

The secularistic reduction of the person

The crisis of the Christian ethos begins at the level of the person. Only the person is capable of communion and relating through love (Stăniloae 2004:17). The secular world has reduced the person only to the visible, material aspect of life, and the greatest danger of modern times is the reduction of the human person, of his life and his religion to history and sociology (Schmemmann 1965:175).

The first task of modern secularism, just like communism, is to create the new man, the modern man, a man reduced to material needs and incapable of a living personal relationship with his fellow men and with God. The great Russian theologian describes secularised man (Schmemmann 1965) in these terms:

A 'secularist' is usually a very religious man, attached to his church, regular in attending services, generous in his contributions, acknowledging the necessity of prayer, etc. He will have his marriage 'solemnized' in church, his home blessed, his religious 'obligations' fulfilled, all this in perfect good faith. But all this will not in the least alter the plain fact that his understanding of all these spheres: marriage, family, home, profession, leisure, and, ultimately, his religious 'obligations' themselves, will be derived not from the creed he confesses in church, not from the Incarnation, Death, Resurrection and Glorification of Christ, the Son of God become Son of man, but from 'philosophies of life', i.e., ideas and convictions having nothing to do with that creed, if not directly opposed to it. (p. 174)

The crisis of the person in modern times comes from the fact that the religiosity that is included in the 'way of life' is one of outward form and not one of content, of spirituality, the true 'philosophy of life'. If Christianity is denied the power to change a person from within, it is easily determined by secular logic. In Schmemmann's (1965) opinion:

[I]f religion does not control the 'philosophy of life', the latter will inevitably control religion, subdue it from outside to its set of values. One cannot be Orthodox in the Church and a 'secularist' in life. Sooner or later, one also becomes secularist in the Church. (p. 176)

The ultimate goal of the Christian philosophy of life is the fulfillment of the human person through the communion of love (Stăniloae 2004:19). According to this viewpoint, evil is precisely man's surrender to 'impersonal' nature and his subsequent dehumanisation and slavery by it, as it happens through secularism. It is the victory of 'nature' over 'person', a victory that causes a disastrous decline or collapse of both nature and person, because a person's basic purpose is to possess and thereby fulfill nature. Hence, the Christian religion is inherently personal and based on personal relationships of love (Schmemmann 1965):

In the Orthodox doctrine of Church, no 'belonging', no 'participation', no external 'membership' is as such a 'guarantee' of salvation; i.e., of the true belonging to Christ and to the new life, but only a truly personal 'appropriation' and fulfillment of all these gifts. (p. 176)

As a result of secularism, the church has lost perspective on the essential in favour of the form. At the level of the human person, this applied scheme has made man the measure of all things instead of Christ, the One who came into the world to give man the true meaning of life.

The secularistic reduction of the parish

Schmemmann identifies the same secular tendency in the parish: the tendency to emphasise the seen aspect of church life at the expense of the unseen and spiritual. Personal relationships between church members are thinning. The parish as a body of Christ-followers has disintegrated due to a lack of interaction and understanding between clergy and laity. The parish office has become a secularised institution, well-organised and efficient, with officers, by-laws, finances, property, dues, meetings, elections, essentially a 'non-liturgical' institution (Schmemmann 1965:176). It no longer has the communion with Christ as its basis, nor the charity of the early church. With the loss of liturgy's impact on the whole of parishioners' lives and of its goal of preparing people for the eternal life, the church has also lost its ability to communicate its vision of life. Thus, it loses its relevance and becomes incapable of changing the world and defending itself from secularism.

In Schmemmann's (1965) view, the clergy is the first to encourage the secularistic reduction of the parish:

[B]ecause always dealing with 'people' and not 'persons', with externals rather than the internal [...] they measure their work only in terms of external success, numbers, formal compliance

with rules and regulations; they themselves – from inside – subordinate the life of the Church to the categories of prestige, acceptance, security [...]. (p. 177)

He believes that the clergy is not exempt from the prevalent cultural secularism and may even be the first to spread the secularistic view of religion. In his opinion: ‘the easy tendency to focus on “external criteria” results in a reduction to a formal “canonicity” or to an external liturgical “rectitude” or, finally, to “success” as such’ (Schmemmann 1965:175).

With a secularised clergy, the laity focuses on exterior criteria in the parish life. For them to be ‘Orthodox’ means attending church services frequently, keeping some external rules and making financial contributions to the church. Despite all its religious connotations, this kind of parish life is a product of modern secularisation and a recent phenomenon that is worlds apart from life as it was in the ancient Christian communities. The parish was identified with the church in the Eastern Christianity for many centuries. There was no specific ‘organisation’ of the parish because (Schmemmann 1965):

[W]ithin this community the Church had no other function, but that of literally making Christ present: in preaching, sacraments, worship, education – and of making the life of the ‘parishioners’ as Christian, as permeated with Christ, as possible. (p. 182)

However, all these symptoms of the secularised parish life are masked by an ‘officially obliging optimism’ that manifests itself above all in the obsession with building new places of worship. Schmemmann (1965) speaks of a secularised orthodoxy in which ecclesiastical success is measured by:

[B]uilding the largest and greatest churches possible, equipped with all kinds of facilities to keep the congregation busy and satisfied, to celebrate orderly services, and to claim incessantly that Orthodoxy is the true faith. (p. 171)

In such a context, the parish becomes a religious service society that does not insist on the need for people to change their lives and prepare for eternal life.

Yet Schmemmann believes it is precisely such a ‘parish organisation’ that has replaced the church. Ironically, the clergy and the laity are part of a system that they themselves have helped establish; ‘they are literally crushed by a construction in which they have invested so much of their energy, heart and love’ (Schmemmann 1965:186). Given that within the parish there is a failure to embody the orthodox ‘worldview’, which is communicated in the liturgy, how much more difficult it is to have any impact on other aspects of life – family, profession, education and recreation. The liturgy has become an ‘engine not connected to the wheels, producing an energy, which nowhere becomes motion, light or warmth’ (Schmemmann 1964:175).

Schmemmann summarises this profound change in the fundamental understanding of the liturgy. The central question guiding orthodoxy’s entire spiritual experience, ‘what does it reveal about me and my life, what does it mean

for my activity and my relation to men, nature and time’ is replaced little by little by an entirely different question (Schmemmann 1964):

[H]ow much of the liturgy is needed to put me in ‘good standing’? And where religion becomes a matter of obligation and good standing, there inevitably all questions concerning the ‘right’ and the ‘wrong’ practices acquire a kind of independence from their moral, existential, truly religious implications. (p. 175)

The main cause of the current crisis in orthodoxy is eminently liturgical. Alexander Schmemmann’s great merit is that he has succeeded in seeing how all aspects of church life are linked to and grounded in the Eucharistic synaxis, and how their disconnection from it through secularism can deeply affect the mission of Christianity in this world.

The secularistic reduction of the worship

Schmemmann believed that worship is the very essence of the life of the Orthodox Church, the official expression of her faith, the living tradition which eternally actualises the nature of the church as the Body of Christ and embraces, expresses, inspires and defines the whole church, her whole essential nature, her whole life (Schmemmann 1966:12). Worship is the vision of ‘another reality’ the expression thus not merely of piety, but of an all-embracing ‘world view’ (Schmemmann 1973:123).

For Alexander Schmemmann (1965), as a liturgiologist, liturgy and worship of the Orthodox Church are not simply pious acts of little import, but rather formative activities, which enable Christians to develop an adequate theological ‘vision’ and find answers and solutions to all their problems:

Our Church, writes Schmemmann, need not be ashamed of her identification with liturgy [...] for the liturgy was always experienced and understood in our Church as precisely the entering of men into, and communion with the reality of the Kingdom of God, as that experience of God which alone makes possible everything else, all action, all fight. (p. 188)

From this perspective, the alteration of worship and its reduction under the influence of secularism to a collection of rituals and ceremonies, as a self-sufficient object of worship designed to meet some practical needs of the faithful is, according to Schmemmann, the primary cause of the degradation of Christian life in modern times. Thus, the church has become a religious service society and a function of the cult (Fagerberg 2004:84).

The liturgy is no longer at the centre of the life of the church. The sacraments are detached from the Eucharist, put together and schematised in order to provide the faithful with the required ‘spiritual help’ in the most easily digestible way. Worship is no longer seen by the faithful as a revelation and deed of the church, or as a means of communion with Christ at the holy banquet of the Kingdom of Heaven, but is often perceived from a pietistic and individualistic perspective.

The church with its worship comes to be seen as an institution that should satisfy people’s needs, reflect their interests and

accommodate to their 'way of life'. Schmemmann observes that this is indeed what is happening to the Orthodox Church, as members participate in the 'ancient and colourful rites' on Sundays, but then share in the secularised world view during the rest of the week; the Orthodox Church is rapidly becoming a 'Sunday church'. The liturgical life that is limited to Sundays and a few 'must days' such as Christmas and Good Friday, is symptomatic of the breakdown in liturgical piety, which was at one time organically and fundamentally woven into the fabric of everyday life (Schmemmann 1964):

The feasts and their eves, the bright sadness' of the Lenten services, the unique celestial beauty of the Mariological cycle, the warm, almost personal commemoration of the Saints, the long and solemn crescendo of the Holy Week – all this ... is virtually absent from real liturgical life. (p. 164)

The main aspect of the liturgical crisis is the disconnection of all aspects of the church life from liturgy. Sadly, Schmemmann (1964) remarks that, in modern times, the liturgy is still the centre of the Orthodox Church:

[U]nquestioned, unchallenged, unopposed. But it is in fact a center without periphery, a heart with no control on blood circulation, a fire with nothing to purify and to consume, because that life which had to be embraced by it, has been satisfied with itself and has chosen other lights to guide and to shape it. (p. 175)

Alexander Schmemmann's solutions for overcoming the contemporary liturgical crisis

Having identified the main problems of orthodoxy in a secularised society, Alexander Schmemmann proceeds to make propositions for overcoming this crisis. His attitude towards a possible reform of the cultus is balanced and so moderate that it was considered inconsistent with his liturgical and renewal theology. He was accused of not offering solutions to the problems he identified and of a discrepancy between his outstanding theological vision of the liturgy and the few and mild measures he proposed for liturgical renewal (Denysenko 2010:45–68; Galadza 2007:7–32).

Alexander Schmemmann advocated a renewal of liturgical life, although he was opposed to a radical reform of orthodox worship. He opposed those who saw the liturgy as a changeable ritual and not as a manifestation of the Kingdom of Heaven in the world (Denysenko 2010:111). In his opinion, the starting point for any process of renewal of orthodox worship is the rediscovery of the primacy of the Liturgy in Church life, as the original theology, as the starting point of all church life and the source of all theology, as the manifestation of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. The return to the life and faith of the early Christians, for whom partaking in the Eucharistic sacrifice was the most significant event of their daily lives is, for Alexander Schmemmann, the only way to solve all the issues brought by secularism's infiltration into the current society and into the church.

When the liturgy is the centre of the spiritual life of the church, then the *lex orandi* is related again to the *lex credendi*

and then, the rediscovery of the Eucharist in the patristic spirit mandates a return to the theological vision that has formed the basis of all Eastern Christian theological vision: the doctrine of theosis and its intrinsic link to Eucharistic understanding. It is the only way in which formalism and secular nominalism can be overcome, through spiritual and theological renewal. Therefore, for Schmemmann, the solution to exit the liturgical crisis does not lie in a fixation on rules and rubrics, in restoring the right practices, or in adjusting and changing the worship. In his view, the renewal of cultus is possible only in the spirit of the orthodox liturgical tradition, because (Schmemmann 1964):

[T]he liturgy is a living tradition and cutting away is the wrong method here. What we need, rather, is the understanding of this tradition, this 'essence' of the liturgy. Once this understanding is there, it will naturally lead to the necessary purification, to changes in the cultus, without interruption of continuity and without 'crisis'. (p. 178)

Schmemmann was not an advocate for a liturgical reform because he believed that the solutions to exit the crisis cannot be brought about by formal changes, but by theologically grounded ones. To this end, in order to find a way out of this situation and help orthodoxy regain its missionary vigour and make it once again the 'way to the Kingdom of Heaven', Schmemmann (1964) proposed some interesting solutions:

The liturgy must once again become the mystery par excellence of the church – through which the church is realized and perfected and through which the faithful truly participate in the Eucharistic Supper of the Kingdom of Heaven. This is the only way that the life of the church can acquire an eschatological finality, escape the purely material secular logic and thus enable the whole world to be incorporated into the great mystery of the world to come.

The church must rediscover her missionary vocation by centering her life on the celebration of the liturgy, and by seeking to include, in a real and actual way, all humanity in the mystical body of Christ. To achieve this goal, the Eucharistic liturgy must not be instrumentalized and secularized in such a way as to turn it into a means of resolving the material and spiritual needs of the faithful.

The Holy Eucharist must again be linked to all the sacraments of the church as their fulfillment and crowning, and all the mysteries of the church must leave the sphere of individual privacy and be incorporated into the life of parish communities, thus becoming a living expression of their missionary dynamism.

In explaining the liturgy and worship in general, the church has to overcome the crisis of typological symbolism, which limits itself to a descriptive function of the events linked to the life of the Saviour Jesus Christ, and return to the theological vision of early Christianity, which saw the Eucharistic celebration as the mystery of the future world, as the Last Supper at the table of the Kingdom.

The church must be perceived by all the faithful as a divine – human mystery, in which the human element, composed of clergy and laity, constitutes a dialogical structure based on a joint liturgical and administrative service. Should the higher clergy, the church leadership, reorient itself towards an efficient pastoral and educational ministry relevant to modern man, then solutions

to the crisis will also be found in a perfect synergy between clergy and the faithful.

In order for the liturgy to truly achieve its original purpose, it is necessary to return to the ancient practice of priests reading the silent prayers aloud; catechesis should be used to ensure that priests and the faithful understand the liturgy correctly as the Sacrament of the Kingdom of Heaven, and the participation of all the faithful in the celebration of the liturgy should be promoted by involving them in the bringing of gifts, in singing liturgical hymns and finally by their partaking of the Eucharistic communion 'with a pure heart'. (n.p.)

A careful study of the writings of Father Alexander Schmemmann reveals to future generations of liturgists a sum of theological insights that can be summarised in the following imperatives:

1. Research in Liturgical Theology must be based on careful study of scripture and patristic writings. The return to the Fathers does not mean merely reading their writings, but adopting their spirituality and way of believing.
2. The task for the future Liturgical Theology is to promote the theological hermeneutics and exegesis of liturgical texts with the intention to restore the connection between liturgy, theology and spirituality.
3. Fighting the liturgical crisis requires a theological renewal of the life of the church that will neither take place in reforms, adaptations nor modernisations, but in the return to that vision and experience, which from the beginning had constituted the very life of the church: the liturgy is a whole, the *locus theologicus* where *lex orandi* is the *lex credendi* and the medium in which the faithful are called not only to participate as spectators but also to shape and experience the church as participants.

Contemporary liturgists have taken Alexander Schmemmann's theological vision and views and, by expounding on them, discovered that understanding and participating regularly in the Eucharistic Synaxis is an effective way to counter the effects of secularism in today's world (Geldhof 2017:83–96; Lathrop 1997:204–226).

Conclusion

Through secularisation, modernity introduced a new worldview that is neither anti-religious nor atheistic but rather a new way of life, in which the fundamental tenets of human existence are not based on religious beliefs but on material and spiritual comfort. Alexander Schmemmann was very concerned about this phenomenon and his incredibly timely observations and remarks on how secularism affects the Orthodox Church and Christianity in general remain true today, and the remedies he suggests for resolving the spiritual crisis caused by this phenomenon are all centred on the necessity of rediscovering the liturgy.

In his opinion, the Eucharistic liturgy must once again become the full expression of the life of the church, the main reservoir of theological thought, a living source and norm in all aspects of the communal and personal life of Christians in

the 21st century. The remarks of Alexander Schmemmann are in line with the general trend of liturgical reform manifested in Western Christianity in the last century and they emphasise the importance of changes of substance rather than of form in the search for a viable solution to the crisis of modern secularism.

With his propositions, Alexander Schmemmann wanted to achieve his main goal that the liturgy would again become what it had been in early Christianity: an action of the whole church, an action by which the church, as well as each parish individually defines itself as a community of clergy and laity having received power to destroy all idols, 'especially that one which is secularism'. But the liturgy has this power only if it is known, lived and perceived at its proper value (Schmemmann 1964:178).

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